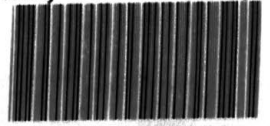


# The Nibelungenlied

by Cora Lena Kimball

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A Graduation Thesis

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## The Niebelungen Lied.

Far up in the country of the Netherlands there ruled once upon a time a rich king by the name of Siegmund. But one son belonged to the royal family, and he a handsome stalwart youth renowned far and near for his surpassing prowess in arms. Once in his boyhood while riding alone in the country of the North, Siegfried, for that was the prince's name, came to a dark ravine in which a company of giants were assembled around an enormous heap of gold. When they saw the stranger they asked him to come and divide between their two kings Shilbung and Niebelung, the treasure they had just brought from the cavern near at hand. The hero good-naturedly dismounted and undertook the task, but so vast was the heap of golden treasures that he failed to finish dividing them. The two kings, angered, sprang upon him suddenly to slay him, but undaunted the knight stood his ground, and so great was his quick power in handling the sword that he slew one after another of all his antagonists. He then overcame the dwarf who guarded the golden hoard, and took from him the treasure and the magic cloak of the Niebelungen. From that time Siegfried was acknowledged King of the Niebelungen Land which made him the richest and most powerful of all knights.

In Worms, the capital of Burgundy

reign Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher, the three sons of Hancrat, late King of the land. The star of the Burgundian court is Kriemhild, the only sister of the three Kings. One night Kriemhild has a curious dream: She dreams that she has trained a beautiful falcon, when two fierce eagles pounce down on it and kill it. Troubled by the dream she relates it in the morning to her mother Hame Ute, who interprets the falcon to be the dreamer's predestined husband whom two enemies will slay. Kriemhild bursts into tears and vows that she will never marry since she is doomed to suffer woe through man. But alas for her vow! So distant Netherland has the fame of the beauty of the Burgundian princess spread and Siegfried determines to win her for his bride. In spite of the warnings of his parents he sets out for the city of Worms. Arriving there, he enters numerous combats and tournaments in which he is always victorious; but he watches in vain for the princess. She is not permitted to appear at court or to be present at the games. Siegfried has endured a twelve-month in such suspense when one day messengers arrive from the Kings of the Hanes and of the Saxons with a declaration of war against the Burgundians. Siegfried offers to assist Gunther and his offer is accepted. As a result the Burgundians are conquered and upon his return from the war Siegfried for the first time beholds the object of his love.

Meanwhile a rumor reaches Gorm of the wonderful beauty and strength of Brunhild, the maiden queen of Iceland, and how every suitor for her hand is obliged to abide three combats with her or else straight way perish. Gunther, fond of adventure, determines to try his fortune with the martial queen, and asks Siegfried to accompany him. The hero consents to go and promises to win for him the queen if he may on his return take Kriemhild as his wife. Gunther agrees to the plan and the two princes set out on their journey with a chosen band of warriors. Arriving at the court of Iceland they are received by Brunhild who accosts Siegfried by name and welcomes him. Siegfried then explains that he is Gunther's vassal and that the Burgundian monarch is come to win her hand. Gunther enters the combats, and assisted by Siegfried who is rendered invisible and doubly strong by the magic cloak, conquers the beautiful queen and claims her as his bride. Upon the arrival of the party in Burgundy, Kriemhild is wedded to Siegfried and receives from him Brunhild's girdle and ring which he has won from her in combat and also the Nibelungen hoard. A curse is attached to the treasure and an evil fate follows its possessor. A rivalry immediately springs up between the two queens and angry words are exchanged.

Siegfried and Kriemhild soon set out for the Netherlands where Siegfried becomes King by the



abdication of his father. When ten years have passed, with a large retinue of Niebelungen warriors they pay a visit to Worme at the invitation of King Gunther. After the first splendid festivities, a strife for precedence arises between Kriemhild and Brunhild. The two queens meet at the door of the Cathedral and each insists on entering first. Brunhild claims that Siegfried is Gunther's vassal; and Kriemhild denies it and asserts that Siegfried, not Gunther overcame her rival in Iceland, showing the ring and girdle in proof. The two kings, who are summoned by their wives, endeavor to compose the quarrel, but Gunther's uncle, Hagen goes secretly to Brunhild and promises to revenge her, then going to Kriemhild he professes friendship and offers to watch over Siegfried in case Brunhild should attempt any secret revenge. Kriemhild is deceived and tells the traitor that in his youth Siegfried has slain a fire-spitting dragon which all the country feared and by bathing in its blood has become invulnerable with the exception of a small spot between his shoulders where a linden leaf fell before the blood was dry. This secret she tells him and even promises at Hagen's suggestion to embroider a little cross on Siegfried's cloak, that he may know exactly where to protect him from flying javelins. The catastrophe instantly follows. Siegfried is taken out to hunt by Gunther and

Hagen, and in a moment of gayest peace and confidence is treacherously slain. Dark are the days of woe and mourning that follow. Kriemhild is heart-broken and studies only how she may avenge her loved one's death. Thirteen years then pass away during which the Niebelungen hoard is wrested from the widow by her enemies. The curse follows it and the three brothers Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher quarrel about the treasure and Hagen finally sinks it in the Rhine, making each take an oath that he will not reveal the spot while either of the others is alive. Meanwhile embassadors from Hunland arrive soliciting the hand of Kriemhild for King Attila. She hesitates but finally consents when told that in this way she may obtain her revenge for Siegfried's death. She is married to Attila in the land of the Rhine and then plans day and night how she may get possession of Gunther, Hagen and the Niebelungen treasure. Finally in the thirteenth year of their marriage she persuades Attila to invite the whole Burgundian court to a grand high-tide or festival in Hunland. The invitation is accepted in spite of Hagen's remonstrances and the Niebelungen's are kindly received by Attila who knows nothing of Kriemhild's plans of vengeance. On the following day, at the royal feast the strife begins. Hagen snatches from Kriemhild's arms her little son, Gottlieb, and strikes off his head with a sword.



A terrible conflict ensues between the Huns and Burgundians. The floor of the banquet hall is strewn with dead bodies, till all the Burgundians are slain save Hagen and Gunther. They are bound and brought before Kriemhild who demands to know where they have sunk the Nibelungen hoard. Hagen refuses to tell while Gunther lives, when Gunther is instantly slain at his sister's command. Hagen then declares that only he and God know the whereabouts of the treasure and no one will ever learn it from him. Kriemhild, enraged, snatches ~~the~~ from him the sword which had once belonged to Siegfried and strikes off his head. Hildebrand a famous warrior rushes forward and slays the avenging Kriemhild, thus putting an end to the night of slaughter.

Such is the story of the 'Nibelungen Lied'. About the middle of the last century, an aged scholar while rummaging in the library of an old monastery of South Germany came across a manuscript of great age and unusual length. Curious to learn its contents and its history he called to it the attention of the scholars of the age. Examination proved it to be a copy of an epic poem, which after having enjoyed great popularity among the Teutonic races of Europe for generations had been lost and almost forgotten for nearly three centuries. The poem was published and learned men devoted their time and energies

to its study. The manuscript ended with the words "der Niebelungenliet" and from them the ordinary appellation "The Niebelungen Lay" is derived.

Most of the dramatic personae of the Lay have been identified with either mythological or historical characters, and the principal events described in it can be traced in history. Siegfried is synonymous with Baldur, of whom we read in Scandinavian mythology - God of light and life - the sun which quickens the seed and releases it from sleep.

Kriemhild and Krimhild both represent Goddesses of the earth and Hagen, God of darkness. Attila is the original of Etzel, King of the Huns. Gunther is the German name for Gundicarus, King of Burgundy, and Dietrich of Bern is the terrible Theodoric of Verona. In the year 436 Gundicarus with all his followers was destroyed by the Huns under the leadership of Attila. It is this event which is supposed to be represented by the catastrophe of the Lay. The Niebelungenlied may be said to resemble the Iliad of Homer in that it is a monument of an epoch in a nation's history; a vivid picture of the social customs, of the religious faith and of the predominating passions of a race at one period of its existence. The poem is martial in its character, and from beginning to end resounds with the clash of arms. It consists of thirty-nine parts called "adventures", written in a peculiar measure. Like other long narrative poems of its time

the *Völsungenlied* is wanting in an artistic union of its parts. It divides itself into two stories; one ending with the death of Siegfried, the other closing with the fulfillment of *Strenghild's* revenge of that death. When contrasted with the romances of the time this national epic is distinguished by its good keeping of characters, by the absence of lifeless descriptions and forced similes, and by an orderly progress of events; though many details of the narrative, especially those of the closing series of battles seem tedious to modern readers. The scenes are portrayed with great vividness and though those of the conclusion are extremely savage and lie beyond the pale of our sympathies, this old epic develops two motives that command admiration. The first is the long enduring love of *Strenghild*. In Siegfried she had known a hero who, possessing supernatural power in addition to his personal beauty, and his steadfast kindness, seemed to her of more value than a whole host of mere warriors like *Hagen*. For his sake she mourned long years in solitude; to avenge his death she married an alien king and sacrificed her own nearest relatives. Such power and endurance of will commands admiration even while we deplore its devotion to no higher purpose than that of revenge. The other noble motive that controls all the chief events of the narrative is that of loyalty unconquerable. Not to gratify any personal spite nor to gain any selfish advantage



did Hagen slay Siegfried; but to avenge a wrong believed to have been inflicted upon the queen.

In spite of the feeling of horror which we can not but entertain toward him for his atrocious deeds, there is a tragic greatness constantly showing itself in Hagen's character which inspires us with a certain admiration. He is nevertheless, daring, heroic and loyal and we unconsciously pity him in his hour of despair. We see throughout the whole poem the heroism and fidelity which distinguished the men of those times when chivalry gave tone to all their actions. The German in this poem is more clear and simple than it is at present. General ideas were not yet introduced into it and traits of character only are narrated.

The "Klage" or Lament which forms an appendix to the *Nibelungen* is a species of epilogue in which the disasters of the story are reviewed. In its most remarkable passage *Trümbild* receives divine pardon because the motive which had led her to the guilt of blood had been reverence for truth. This is a key to the poem, the pervading sentiment being truthfulness and sincerity.

The more carefully we study the *Nibelungen Lied* and its history, the more we are impressed with its exceptional character. Critics generally agree that it must have been written near the beginning of the thirteenth century, and its preservation through the long centuries between its birth and its

discovery seems almost miraculous. During the Middle Ages it seems to have been less popular than other romances, being disliked by the clergy on account of its heathenish character and by the courtly poets on account of its rudeness, and its preservation is probably due only to the ~~mass~~ inherited fondness of the masses for their old traditions.

By whom this poem was written is still a disputed question. Theories have been numerous and varied and scarcely a poet lived within its century who has not at sometime been considered its author. One of the early Minnesingers who was called the "Stürenberger" has left fifteen detached stanzas written in the measure of the *Hiebelungen Lied*. His real name is not definitely known but it is thought that he was either Magnus or Konrad von Stürenberg who were natives of Upper Austria and the German critics incline more and more to the belief that we must accept him as the great poet of the Middle Ages. Whoever he may have been the author of this ancient poem was certainly no ordinary being. He was possessed with the heart and feeling of a true poet. He has entered heart and soul into his work whether it be to sing the praises of the lovely *Greinhild* or to relate the story of Hagen's treachery and the horrible sight of carnage.



He has an eye for the Beautiful and the True and with a careless simplicity seldom seen in the literature of to-day he winds his way through the complex narrative scattering in its rhymes many a little touch of pathos and even solemn beauty and many an echo of gayest melody.

Were the name of this great singer definitely known it would be immortal; but Carlyle spoke truly when he said of him - "A true old singer and taught of Nature herself! Whether let us call him an inglorious Milton, since now he is no longer a mute one. What good were it that the four or five letters composing his name should be printed, and pronounced, with absolute certainty? All that was mortal in him is gone utterly; of his life, and its environment, as of the bodily Tabernacle he dwelt in, the very ashes remain not; like a fair heavenly Apparition, which indeed he was, he has melted into air, and only the Voice he uttered, in virtue of its inspired gift, yet lives and will live".

To the Germans the Liebelungen Lied is dearer than the most famous productions of their most noted poets. They cling to it as to the memory of happy days. To us it is a glimpse into the first history of Europe, yes into the first history of mankind and we would fain mingle our praises of the great poet with those which rise from the lips of his countrymen.